

Transitions—Leveraging Skills for New Opportunities



By Robert Breithaupt

In his new best-seller, *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell suggests that mastery of a skill comes after 10,000 hours of work, but also cites environment and aptitude as contributing factors. The ability to move from one meaningful career experience to another is often a result of utilizing expertise refined through life experiences. Those who meet with success generally leverage their past accomplishments and skills obtained, rather than counting on academic preparation in a specific area alone.

The PASIC 2009 session “Transitions—Leveraging Skills for New Opportunities” will feature me and other panelists in a discussion about life as “music professionals”—how skills obtained in various facets of their careers have served us well as we have moved into roles as leaders in new organizations and new settings. This session will be valuable for graduating students as well as any individual who is contemplating a change that requires risk, confidence, and the development of a “skills inventory.”

From the beginning, those of us who have studied percussion instruments are actually preparing to lead and are learning to adapt to change. In many cases it is the drummer in the teenage garage band who also books the gigs,

prints the business cards, calls the rehearsals, and negotiates the truce between other sparring members. Percussionists are the first to arrive at the rehearsal and the last to leave, and the drum line rehearses all summer—and winter. The outcome of this frenetic approach is the development of the “Drummer’s DNA”: a skill set that, while never clinically proven, does seem to be present if we consider how many individuals with similar experiences early in their lives have used those to provide an underpinning for future leadership and business opportunities.

Here are a few basic characteristics present in development of the “Drummer’s DNA”:

1. Learning a fundamental technique (principles or “values”). The application of principles to a majority of instruments in an entire family of instruments.
2. Being asked to lead *and* follow simultaneously. This skill is necessary in both a conducted ensemble and as a drummer in a group, at any level.
3. The ability to be creative, but not necessarily to improvise. Adaptability must be present in choosing an approach to performing as a drummer or percussionist.
4. The ability to improvise, even when others aren’t or can’t. For example, the young drummer in a jazz ensemble may be the only one truly improvising—leveraging knowledge and multiple skills in effectively interpreting a drum chart, and essentially leading the band, despite the fact that there is someone who *appears* to be in charge in front of the band.

The list could be much longer, but the point in making such a list is to provide both context and confidence to those who are dedicating themselves to a discipline that may seem narrow at times, but that provides an abundance of skills that will allow for many different avenues for success if we are smart enough, or perhaps just intuitive enough, to use them.

Daniel Pink, author of the popular book *A Whole New Mind*, suggests that we are

entering a new age where the creative, intuitive thinker and doer will find great opportunities, especially if we consider our experiences to be a part of a “story.” As he explains it, “We are our stories. We compress years of experience, thought, and emotion into a few compact narratives that we convey to others and we tell ourselves. That has always been true. But personal narrative has become more prevalent, and perhaps more urgent...when many of us are freer to seek a deeper understanding of ourselves and our purpose.”

There is no denying the rapid pace that the music business is changing. In “Transitions—Leveraging Skills for New Opportunities,” the message will be simple: move forward with confidence that each day has been a learning experience, which can be used in a positive way to find multiple paths to success.

Robert Breithaupt is a Past President of PAS and has served the Jazz Arts Group (JAG), a leading national nonprofit jazz organization, as executive director since 2001, and has been the drummer in JAG’s Columbus Jazz Orchestra since 1980. Breithaupt has performed in solo, group, and orchestral settings and has appeared with Terry Gibbs, John Pizzarelli, Kirk Whalum, and dozens of other notable artists. He regularly performs and tours with trumpet virtuoso Byron Stripling and Broadway star Sandy Duncan. Breithaupt is Professor of Music and Department Chair of Performance at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of the textbook *The Complete Percussionist*, and the DVD *Snare Drum Basics*. He co-founded the Summer Drumset Workshops and presents clinics and seminars worldwide. PN

